

**HISTORICAL  
DICTIONARY  
OF BENIN**

**Third Edition**

**SAMUEL DECALO**

# HISTORICAL DICTIONARY OF BENIN Third Edition

by  
**SAMUEL DECALO**

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This book is dedicated to my wife, Roma.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

Introductory Notes	374
General Works	378
Early (Nineteenth-Century) Historical and Exploration Accounts	383
Historical Studies	396
Anthropology, Ethnology, and Sociology	426
Politics, Administration, and International Relations	430
Economics, Agriculture, Trade, and Commerce	476
Education	503
Scientific Studies	505
Religion	513
Literature, Poetry, Theater, and Cinematography	527
Geography	539
Art	546
Tourism	554
Reference and Bibliography	556
About the Author	565

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## EDITED BY CONTENTS

Editor's Foreword, by Jon Woronoff	vii
Note on Spelling	ix
Recent Political Chronology	xi
Abbreviations and Acronyms	xxi
INTRODUCTION	1
THE DICTIONARY	19
BIBLIOGRAPHY	374
Introductory Notes	374
General Works	378
Early (Nineteenth-Century) Historical and Exploration	
Accounts	385
Historical Studies	396
Anthropology, Ethnology, and Sociology	426
Politics, Administration, and International Relations	450
Economics, Agriculture, Trade, and Commerce	476
Education	500
Scientific Studies	505
Religion	513
Literature, Poetry, Theater, and Cinematography	527
Linguistics	539
Art	546
Tourism	554
Reference and Bibliography	556
About the Author	565

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

### INTRODUCTORY NOTES

Francophone Africa, and its smaller components like Benin, still suffers from a dearth of scholarly work in the English language, though this has slowly been corrected in several fields. Apart from the early pioneering work of Herskovits (Herskovits 1938, 1958), only in the mid-1970's did the first books appear (Ronen 1975; Manning 1978, 1981) dealing exclusively with Dahomey/Benin. Their number has not been significantly augmented since, but a steady stream of books has appeared that include chapters on Dahomean history or recent Beninois developments. The first of this genre tended to be either overly general (Thompson 1963) or dealt with specific phenomena such as military coups (Skurnik 1970; Bebler 1973; Decalo 1976, 1990). But with time the result has been—especially after Allen's contribution (Allen et. al., 1989)—that there is a basic, if disciplinarily uneven, corpus of books, or chapters in books, on Benin in English.

The interested reader can also tap a by-now not insignificant number of articles published in English, though many of these are in a variety of weeklies, academic periodicals, or annuals. Though, for all practical purposes, French language sources are indispensable for any serious in-depth analysis (one significant exception being current affairs, but others are slowly emerging) the bleak picture outlined in the 2nd edition of this volume for those only versant in English is no longer true. A synthesis of English and French sources would be ideal, of course. This is by now also true for French scholars who—judging by their claims to originality, and their footnotes—are woefully unaware of their Anglophone counterparts' research.

The bibliographical section of this volume endeavours to simplify the quest for data. However, in order to include literature that has accrued since the 2nd edition without making the volume

too long (and costly), the thrust has somewhat changed. Hitherto, omissions notwithstanding, the goal was comprehensiveness, even at the cost of including ephemeral material or short articles. Most of these have now been dropped and a degree of selectivity has been exercised in compiling the bibliography. As a further aid, the following comments serve in pinpointing some of the principal work in several fields.

**SOCIOLOGY, ANTHROPOLOGY, AND HISTORY.** The best single work in this broad field remains Robert Cornevin's massive *Histoire du Dahomey* (1962), revised and updated to appear in 1981 as *La République Populaire du Bénin* (1981). The volume surveys in great detail the country's topography, socio-economic infrastructure, ethnic groups, colonial conquest, and history, but is quite bland, and of little use for the postindependence era, or politics in general. The work is ideally complemented by Maurice Glélé's *Naissance d'un Etat Noir* (1969), which traces in minute detail Dahomey's evolution up to 1965 (see next section), and François de Medeiros' *Peuples du Golfe du Bénin* (1984) that through individual chapters provides fresh insights into the origins and histories of the region's coastal ethnic groups.

Other noteworthy studies in these fields include Jacques Lombard's classic work on the Bariba of the north, *Structures du type "féodal" en Afrique Noire* (Lombard 1965), and the works on Dahomey's Fon by Argyle (1966), Akinjogbin (1967), Le Hérissé (1911), Polanyl (1966), and M. Quénum (1938). One should also mention the study of the colonial competition for this region (Obichere 1971), Casimir Agbo's work on Ouidah (Agbo 1959), and the valuable study of Akindélé and Aguessy on Porto Novo and the study of Akindélé and Aguessy (1953), Grivot's *Réactions Dahoméennes* (Grivot 1954), and the many solid articles of Paul Mercier and Jacques Lombard (both of whom served in Porto Novo's Institut Français d'Afrique Noire), Robert Cornevin, Jacques Bertho, Melville Herskovits' books and articles, and the historical and ethnological research of Edouard Dunglas, Pierre Verger (especially on the Dahomey-Brazil slave trade), and Jacques Bertho. Maurice's work on Atakora, recently reprinted (Maurice 1985) with its painstakingly assembled sketches and clan-lists, is likewise a very useful though inevitably dated contribution. To these should be added the numerous, and refreshingly revisionist,

historical studies of Robin Law and Ross, indispensable, of course, for students limited to English-language literature. These studies are only a handful of the many fine works in these sections. Being one of Africa's better-known countries, Benin has attracted considerable interest, and indigenous scholars have begun to contribute to our knowledge, as especially attested by the work of Hélène d'Alméda-Tupor and Félix Abiola Iroko.

**POLITICS AND CONTEMPORARY AFFAIRS.** The first thorough, full-length studies of Dahomey's political evolution were Maurice Glélé's *Naissance d'un Etat Noir*, referred to above, and Dov Ronen's *Dahomey Between Tradition and Modernity*. The former is a minutely detailed analysis of the period 1945-1965, incredibly rich in original data and information about the dominant political personalities and the evolution of the country's unique political style, and has no rival to date. Written by a Beninois at a time when the military was in power, the study is lean on the political role of the armed forces. Since the latter topic has attracted much English-language research, this gap can easily be filled by the works of Skurnik (1968, 1970), Bebler (1973), Lemarchand (1968), Matthews (1966), and Decalo (1968, 1970, 1971, 1973, 1979, 1990).

Ronen's book, leaner on detail than Glélé's, carries the political analysis into the "Revolutionary" (post-1972) period, providing valuable insights into the nature of politics in transitional societies. Ronen's other articles in this section (including his chapter in Harbeson 1988), together with Decalo's on the rhetoric-reality cleavage of Beninois Marxism, are ideally complemented by Chris Allen's monograph-length chapter (Allen et al. 1988) that provides a fairly contemporary survey of the Kérékou era, and an analysis of several policy initiatives rarely touched upon, at least by English-language authors. Allen's subsequent articles on contemporary Benin are also among the best in the English language.

Other important sources on the political and economic evolution of Benin include Manning's twin economic-history studies (Manning 1978, 1981), Virginia Thompson's (1963, 1972), Robert Cornevin's various articles, and the annual sections on Benin in *Africa Contemporary Record* until its recent demise. *West Africa* (London) and *Africa Report* also intermittently publish brief reports

on Benin (most of these are the kind dropped from this Bibliography) while the monthly issues of the two series of *Africa Research Bulletin* (Exeter) and the Banque Centrale de l'Afrique de l'Ouest's quarterly "Indicateurs Economiques" and other bulletins (that being mostly statistics require little French) provide more than adequate and utterly indispensable primary data on ongoing political and economic developments. The biweekly *Africa Confidential* also periodically publishes brief reports on Benin that despite their brevity have detail not easily obtainable in any other source.

Finally, three works from the other sections need be mentioned: Huannou's guide to the fairly voluminous Beninois literature (Huannou 1984) that discusses the literary role and themes of each main author; Etienne-Nugué's *Artisanats traditionnels*. (Etienne-Nugué 1984) that is detailed study, replete with several hundred photos, of artisanal and other markets in Benin; and for students of traditional architecture several works have recently appeared of which a real gem is Alain Sinou and Bachir Oloudé's *Porto Novo* (Sinou & Oloudé 1988) if only for its voluminous sketches, photos and architectural layouts on the palace of the Kings of Porto Novo, recently refurbished and transformed into a national museum.

The books and articles are organized under the following subjects:

1. General Works
2. Early (Nineteenth-Century) Historical and Exploration Accounts
3. Historical Studies
4. Anthropology, Ethnology, and Sociology
5. Politics, Administration, and International Relations
6. Economics, Agriculture, Trade and Commerce
7. Education
8. Scientific Studies
9. Religion
10. Literature, Poetry, Theater and Cinematography
11. Linguistics
12. Art
13. Tourism
14. Reference and Bibliography

## 1. GENERAL WORKS

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Note that articles (the, a, an, le, la, les) in French and English and in French, "au" and "à" and "de"—were ignored in any position in alphabetizing the lists that follow.

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